▼ ▼ ▼ Chapter 2

The Creation of Early South Carolina

As we have seen, whites allowed blacks to be enslaved in South Carolina from the beginning. In fact, some of the Lord Proprietors who ruled the state were partners in the business of importing and selling enslaved Africans. The ruling lords certainly did not stand in the way of an English settler who wanted to buy enslaved Africans. Thousands of Africans were enslaved and brought into the state. Whites assumed that African labor could be used to create an English society in Carolina. What whites did not know was that the Africans would create a new society that blended English and African culture. This is the story of that creation.

The Rice Culture

How important would Africans be to the new colony? That would depend on the ways the colonists chose to make a living. The colonists found no gold, as the Spanish had in Mexico. Land, and what it could produce, was to be the key to the colonists' wealth. They tried many crops. Eventually they chose two that could be sold to the rest of the world—rice and indigo. Without the labor of thousands of people, they could not grow enough of these crops to get rich. Enslaved Africans provided that labor. So we might conclude that Africans, although not by their own choice, helped make colonial South Carolina an economic success. Africans also had a great impact on day-to-day life in the colony. To put it another way, Africans helped create its culture.

Today, when we think of products that are important in our state, we do not think of rice. Very little rice is grown here now. However, in the 1700s rice was the most important crop in South Carolina. The swampy areas near the coast were one of the world's best rice-growing regions. The colony grew huge amounts of rice. Estimates vary, but from the 1700s to the 1860s the region produced around 70 million pounds each year. In 1860 alone, the colony harvested 119 million pounds. How much is 119 million pounds of rice? One pound of rice produces about ten cups of cooked rice. If you calculate the volume of a cup and do a bit of multiplication, you can compute the volume in cubic feet of cooked rice. If you stacked these one foot cubes of cooked rice up in the air, it would create a stack 1,935 miles high. If you covered the surface of a football field, it would be over 210 feet deep in rice. That is like a 21 story building the size of a football field. That is a lot of rice!

Africans knew how to cook rice, and they liked it. At first the English settlers had little use for rice themselves. They saw its value as a product to sell to others. In far away ports "Carolina gold" rice became famous and brought a good price. In a sense it was gold, because it made the white planters rich. When you see one of the old mansions in the Low Country, or in Charleston, Georgetown, or Beaufort, you are probably seeing the results of the great profits they made. Cotton would later become "king" in the state, but rice remained economically important until about 1900. Rice began its decline with the Civil War. The war removed the cheap, yet skilled, labor that grew rice for the white planters. After the war, workers demanded cash payments. Planters could not afford to repair all the damage that was done to the rice fields during the war. Hurricanes later did further damage to the fields.

The enslaved Africans contributed more than their hard work. Rice was a common crop in western Africa. Many enslaved Africans brought with them the

Methods of threshing rice were brought from Africa. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide D-43 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of the Charleston Museum, Charleston, S.C.*

secrets of growing rice as it was done in their homeland. First, they cleared the forests. They cut down trees. They burned or removed logs and stumps. Next, they broke the soil with a hoe, sowed the seeds, and pulled up any weeds that threatened to choke the tender rice shoots. When the rice was ripe, they cut the stalks with a sickle. They bundled the stalks together and then removed the rice in one of two ways. One way was to beat the bundles against a board so that the rice fell off. The other way was to lay the stalks on the ground and beat them with a "flail." A flail was a pole with a short piece of rope on the end. Attached to the other end of the rope was a short piece of heavy wood. Swinging the pole allowed the worker to beat the rice out of the stalks with the short piece of wood.

The job was not yet done. Husks still encased the rice grains. Workers removed the husks with a mortar and pestle. They make the mortar by hollowing out a log on one end. Sitting the hollowed-out log on the other end, they placed the rice inside. Then the worker would use a stick with a rounded end to smash the husks off the rice grains. This process also polished the grains.

Finally, the smashed husks had to be removed from the grains. They placed the contents from the mortar in a large flat basket, called a "fanner" basket. The worker would then gently toss the mixture of rice grains and smashed husks in the air. The breeze would blow the lighter smashed husks away from the basket and the heavier grains would fall back down into the basket. In effect, this fanned the husks away. What was left after all this work was the final product, Carolina gold.

Not only were the skills African, the working style was also African. The workers labored in unison, usually singing to keep the pace of the work together. White landowners soon learned the value of an African who knew these things. Advertisements for enslaved Africans often stressed that they were from the rice growing region of Africa.

Another reason why Africans were important in the growing of rice was that they were less vulnerable to the deadly diseases carried by mosquitoes that bred in the low-lying rice fields. Without resistance to malaria and yellow fever, Africans could not have survived at all in the rice fields. Economic prosperity for the white Carolina rice planters would have been impossible. No one understood why at that time, but white workers grew sick and often died working in

the rice fields. Africans generally did not. The reason, we now know, was that malaria and yellow fever were common in the tropical regions of Africa. People living there had become partly immune to the effects of these diseases.

Equally important, white planters had no source of labor they could pay to do this hot and hard work. English settlers did not want to toil in rice fields for someone else. They wanted their own farms. So once planters learned that Africans had more tolerance of the heat than did the Europeans, the planters began to see enslavement as the answer. Now they could get rich selling rice without having to suffer or perhaps even die in the process. The suffering was forced on the enslaved Africans. The owners of the best rice plantations were among the richest men in the English colonies.

It seems clear that although there could have been a South Carolina without the contributions of the enslaved Africans, it would not have been the South Carolina that our history books show us. This is also true in other ways.

(Above) Dykes like this one, which has been restored near Georgetown, were used to control the flow of water into the rice fields. Photo by Aimee Smith. (Left) Enslaved Africans use mortar and pestle method to remove husks from grains of rice. Reproduced from Constance B. Schulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide D-46 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989). Courtesy of Georgetown County Library.*

Gullah

You are no doubt aware that Americans often think those from the South "talk funny." Because of the way Southerners speak, sometimes people who are not from the South think that Southerners are "slow" or not very clever. Of course they are wrong. They are also wrong in thinking that we all sound alike. All southern speech is not the same. Within South Carolina there are differences in speech. For example, people from Charleston can be hard to understand if you are from the western part of the state, called the "up country." Black and white Carolinians sometimes speak a little differently from each other. However, blacks and whites share even more in their speech than they differ. "Sandlappers," as people from South Carolina are sometimes called, of both races use certain words and pronunciations that set them apart from others who claim to speak English. Why is this so?

History affects the way we speak. Even though our ancestors came from different countries and spoke different languages, black and white Carolinians share a lot of history. We have blended all our languages into one, even though that one has different variations. Most of us speak English, although it is not "the king's English."

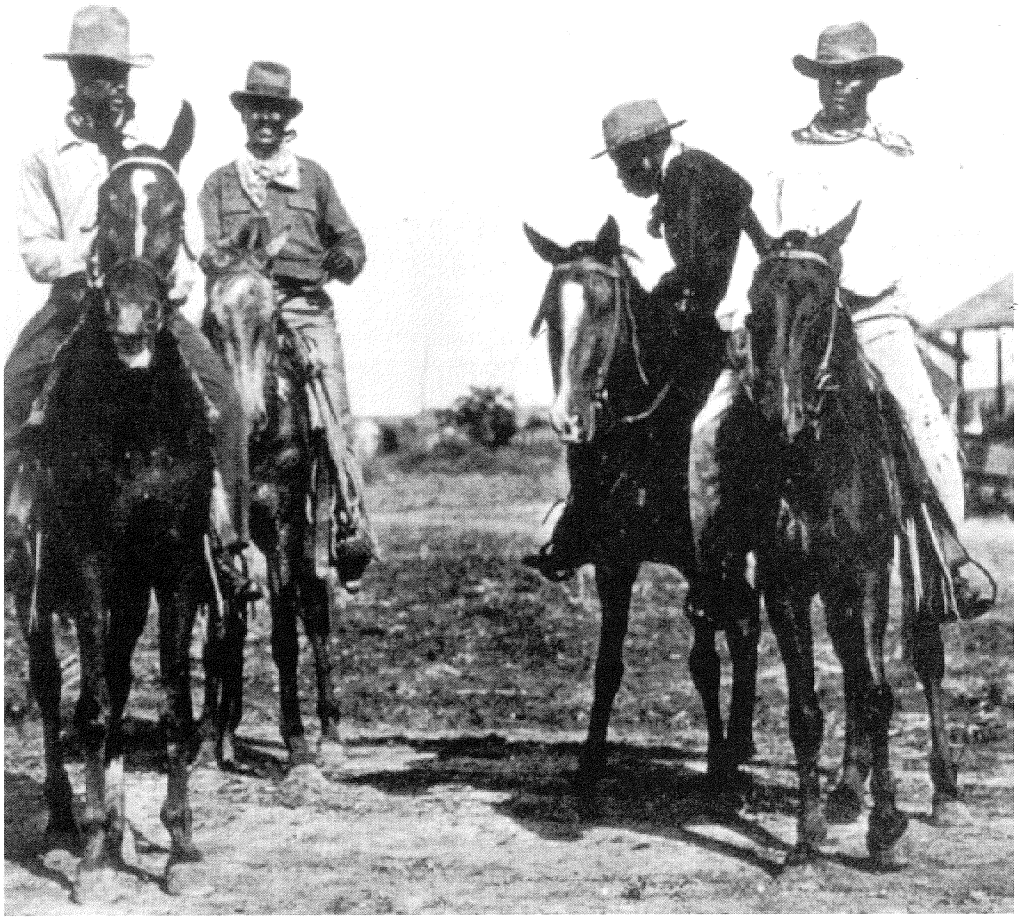
Here is what happened. The Africans who were brought here were members of different societies from different areas of Africa. Although their language often had a common Bantu base, they spoke different dialects that had developed over thousands of years. They could not easily understand each other. We can imagine the verbal chaos that must have filled the air on Sullivan's Island, where most were put ashore on Carolina soil for the first time. English was known only to the Africans who had spent some time on one of the Caribbean Islands. So most had a difficult time trying to communicate with whites as well as with each other.

In struggling to bridge this gap, Africans began to borrow words from each other. They blended words with the English they learned. The resulting language was more than just the words. Africans also blended voice tones, the rhythms of speaking, pronunciation, and ways of expressing ideas. The result was what is called a "Creole" language. This particular Creole language is called "Gullah." Although it is not as widely spoken as in earlier years, Gullah can still be heard. You are most likely to find it on the "sea islands" along the coast south of Charleston.

Although they may not realize it, many white South Carolinians have also woven African influences into their speech. Sometimes the words themselves are African. One example is "tote," which means carry. Tote is sometimes used to refer to a sack or container, a tote bag. Among the other common terms that can be traced back to African origins are such words as "ok," "phone," "yam," "guy," "honkie," "fuzz," "dig," and "jam." Sometimes the words may be English, but the way they are put together may be African. "Sweet talk" is a common phrase meaning to flatter. Another is "poor mouth," which means to belittle or put down.

People often connect Gullah speech with stories enslaved Africans used to tell. Perhaps you have read some of the "Uncle Remus" stories. Brer Rabbit, Brer Bear, and Brer Fox are among the best known characters in our folklore. Children and adults of all races love them. Generations of gifted storytellers gave us these tales. The stories are part of the Gullah tradition. We will look at these stories more closely in the chapter on literature.

African-Americans from South Carolina are rediscovering their own roots in language and culture. In 1988 the President of Sierra Leone visited the Penn Center on St. Helena Island. He told the people there that his native language was almost the same as the Gullah that some of them still spoke. He invited the people to visit Sierra Leone and see and hear for themselves. The next year they did. The people of Sierra Leone welcomed them like long lost relatives. Of course, that is what they were. The people of Sierra Leone did not know what had happened to those who had been enslaved. Perhaps Europeans had taken their ancestors to Europe, they thought. Perhaps all of them had died, or the maybe the Europeans fattened them up and ate them. (You can see this wonderful and emotional story of homecoming on a 1990 S.C. Educational Television production called "Family Across the Sea.")



(Left) African-American "cowboys" may have brought the idea of open land grazing and cattle drives from Africa. These cowboys in a photo taken around 1900 found more freedom in the American West than they did in the South. Courtesy of William Loren Katz Collection, care of Ethrac Publications, 231 W. 13th St. N.Y., N.Y. 10011, Library of Congress.

(Below) A young African-American child in a 1920s Richard Roberts photo had real heroes to look up to in the American West. Courtesy of Roberts family.

The First Cowboys

We have seen how important African skills and labor were in growing rice. Now we will look at some of the many other areas where African skill and labor helped build the state. As you will see, these skills went far beyond South Carolina. Some of the skills Africans brought helped create the nation. In fact, some of the things that we think of as uniquely American may have started in Africa. Let us begin with cowboys.

Europeans customarily raised small numbers of cattle in a relatively confined area, a pasture. In Africa however, among the Fulani societies, open grazing was common. There were no fences. The Fulani were skilled at raising cattle. When Fulani were enslaved and brought to America, they brought their expertise with them. They introduced the practice of open grazing to South Carolina. Open grazing was the perfect approach for an area with a virtually unlimited supply of land.

A Sketch of African-American jockeys exercising their mounts. Courtesy of William Loren Katz collection, care of Ethrac Publications, 231 W. 13th St., N.Y., N.Y. 10011.

Settlers carried the practice of open grazing to the American West where it combined with Spanish horseback traditions. Western cattle herders traveled from north to south each year, migrating just as the Fulani did. One scholar has even suggested that the origin of the word "cowboy" comes from the custom of having enslaved Africans raise cattle. The term "cowboy" is comparable to the term "houseboy." One worked with cows. The other worked inside the house.

Jockeys

Some enslaved African-Americans worked as stable hands. They had to feed and clean the livestock, care for the carts, wagons, and harnesses, and clean the stables on a regular basis. Others tended different types of livestock, like poultry, sheep, and cows. A yard watchman was responsible for ensuring the safety of the rice and other crops stored on the grounds.

Enslaved African-Americans trained horses on the plantations. The first jockeys in South Carolina were enslaved African-Americans. Their masters gave them classical names like Cato or Pompey. Plantation owners liked to hold competitions against one another. Thus we find the roots of South Carolina's horse-racing tradition. After the Civil War, the horse industry provided good jobs for African-Americans with these skills. The custom of using African-American jockeys continued into the early 1900s. Famous African-American jockeys like Charles Peter Green began their careers in South Carolina. After the early 1900s when lots of money began to be made in racing horses, racing became a virtually all white sport.

Skills and Crafts

Many African-Americans were skilled craftsmen. The earliest arrivals brought from Africa such skills as woodworking, leatherworking, pottery, brickmaking, and metalworking. These skills were invaluable to the South. They were essential for economic growth. Scholar Leonard Stavisky estimated that by the end of the Civil War, 100,000 of the 120,000 artisans in the South were African-American. That is, five of every six people skilled in crafts were African-Americans.

African-American artisans were responsible for much of the construction and building in the South. Most of the magnificent houses constructed in the South were built by enslaved African-Americans.

These highly skilled people crafted many of the iron gates and balconies in Charleston.

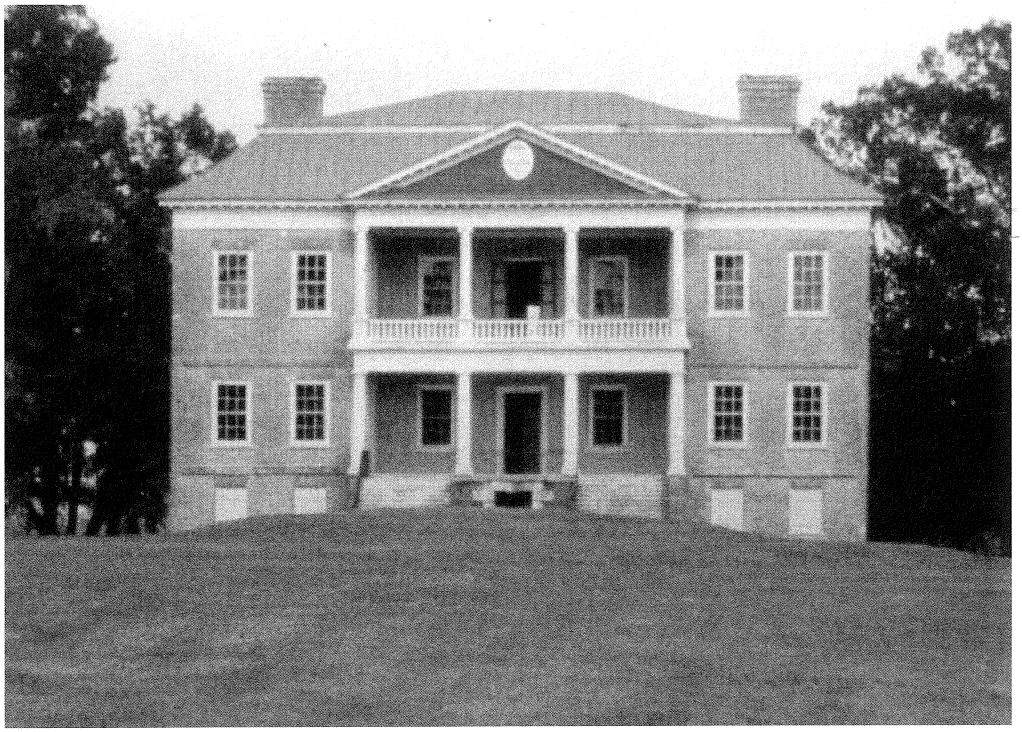
By the late 1600s, there was an enormous demand for labor of all kinds. Those enslaved African-Americans who lived on plantations learned skills that would help make the plantations self-sufficient. Many of these enslaved people were shoemakers, gardeners, weavers, or blacksmiths. They made the kettles, bowls, and other implements used on the plantations. Woodworking skills were valuable in a country covered with woodlands. Records in the early 1700s showed more than seven types of woodworkers alone.

Enslaved carpenters built the homes of the planters and most of the other buildings on the plantations. Their work was highly prized. They earned the respect of both whites and other enslaved Africans. Renty Tucker was one such man. Tucker lived on a plantation in the South Carolina low country in the mid-1800s. He was a skilled carpenter who may have been trained in England. One of his most famous creations was a chapel, St. Mary's Weehawka. First he built a scale model, and then he began on the foundation. He installed stained glass windows and a clock and chimes for the tower, which were bought in England. Within a year and a half, he completed the entire project. He also built a beautiful summer home on Pawleys Island that was much fancier than those of most other planters. Tucker was only one of the many highly skilled enslaved carpenters.

Enslaved African-Americans also were responsible for much of the transportation of the day. They handled a variety of boats. Boats were a major means of travel and shipping in the coastal areas. Boats could range from rowboats to schooners. Some African-Americans were trained as coachmen on plantations. The head coachman was an important person with a special status that commanded respect.

Food had to be prepared for workers as well as for the plantation family. Most plantations had more than one cook, sometimes several. To save time, cooking the midday meal was often done close to the work area. Often a separate cook prepared meals for the children of the plantation. Of course, enslaved African-Americans cooked for themselves as well as for the whites. They made their own breakfasts at their cabins before beginning the day's work. They made their own meals at the end of the day. The women, in particular, had to work at this "double-cooking."

House servants had a wide range of



Skilled African-Americans built nearly all the beautiful plantations and their buildings across the South. This is the main building at Drayton Hall Plantation, near Charleston. Reproduced from Constance B. Shulz, Ed., The History of S.C. Slide Collection, *slide J-20 (Sandlapper Publishing Company, 1989. Courtesy of the S.C. Dept. of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism.*

responsibilities. They had to do the cooking, cleaning, and childcare. Some served the owners as butlers, valets, waiters, or waitresses. Occasionally they were given some responsibility over other house servants if the master and mistress were away. People regarded house servants as superior to field hands because they were more highly trained. When sold, house servants fetched a higher price. In some ways, their lives were better than those of the field hands. Generally their work was not as physically hard. Their food, clothing, and housing were usually better.

However, household skills did not always bring house servants a better life. If masters or mistresses were cruel, close daily contact could lead to abuse. House servants ran away more often than did the field hands. Perhaps this was because house servants had more chances. In general, men ran away far more often than did women. Women could not travel easily with their children and were usually unwilling to leave them behind. Women also had fewer opportunities to travel off the plantation than did men. As a result women were less familiar with the countryside.

Women usually learned typical "female" occupations: cooking, sewing, weaving, washing, and ironing. On the plantations women were responsible for making all the clothing that people wore. Women did the spinning, weaving, sewing, and dyeing of the material. Midwives handled the births, or "birthings." Older women cared for the children and for the sick. A mother often had to go back to work in the fields a short time after giving birth to a child. Without the help of these older women, a baby would have to be carried along or left alone.

Women worked just as hard as men. Many women had to plow and hoe in the fields, cut down trees, pick cotton, and build roads. Women frequently worked in groups with other women, whether they were laboring in the fields or sewing and laundering clothes. Working together, they were able to cooperate and help one another. Women often had to work a double shift, as do many employed women today. After a hard day's work, they still had to come home to sew and weave. The few "store" clothes that were available were for the whites and for the unmarried enslaved males. Women had to make their own clothes and those for their husbands and children. Child care also tied down women in the evenings.

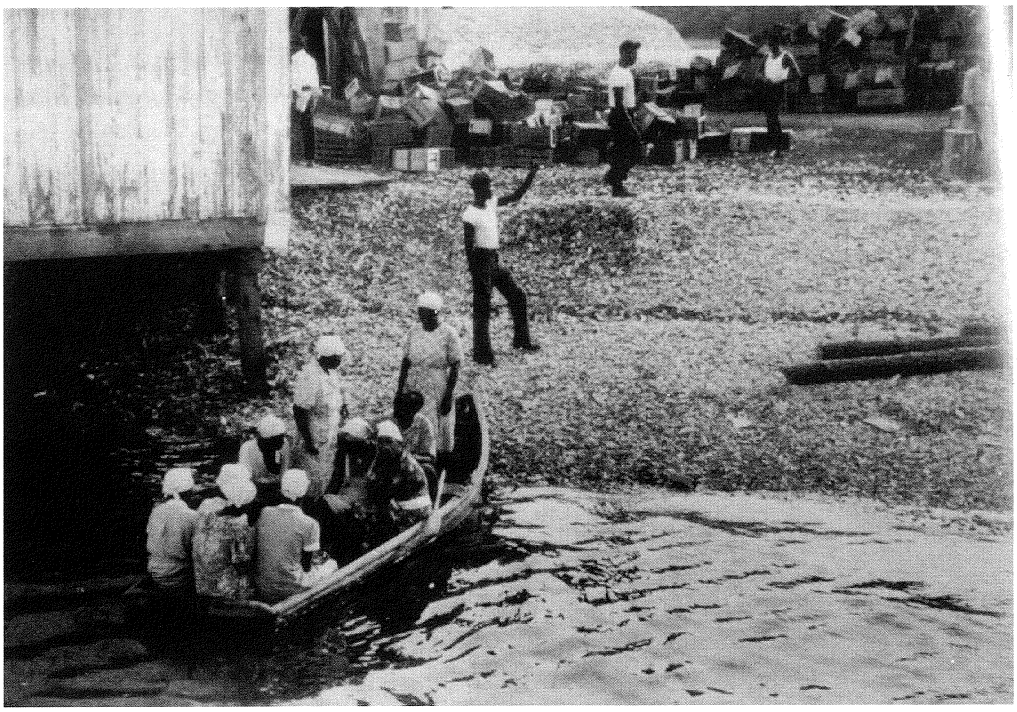
Enslaved African-Americans could not look forward to an early retirement. They generally had to work into their 60s, although owners gave them easier work as they aged. Some of the older men became gardeners or looked after the animals on plantations. At about seventy an enslaved African-American could expect to retire, although some continued to work a reduced load.

On the plantations, children were expected to work from an early age on. Children herded animals, fetched and carried, and did many other small jobs. Children about your age entering their teens took on adult responsibilities.

Enslaved African-Americans worked in many of the early manufacturing plants. In the Saluda area, they worked in one of the early textile mills, doing spinning and weaving. Many of the early mills also needed mechanics, and enslaved African-Americans often did the repair work.

In the cities African-Americans learned a wider variety of skills. Most of the artisans in Charleston were African-Americans. For all intents and purposes, these people built the city and were responsible for the flow of commerce. Masters often hired them out for extra income. Many businesses had busy and slack times during the year. For example, cotton warehouses had the most work when the crop came in. Because these seasonal businesses did not need a large number of workers year-round, hiring out became quite common in the cities. A researcher examining old records found ads from the 1700s showing enslaved African-Americans hired out in several occupations, such as bricklayers and carpenters. A carpenter named Dick, for example, was hired out in Charleston for three months at eighteen pounds per month. In today's money, that would be a great deal, hundreds of dollars. Dick was a very valuable worker.

African-Americans were often apprenticed out at a young age to learn a trade. Some learned skills from masters who were in a particular line of business. In Charleston, which was a seaport, many enslaved African-Americans learned the various trades associated with ships and boating. Some became ship carpenters. Others worked as caulkers, who made sure that boats did not leak by filling in the seams of



During enslavement, African-Americans were hired out in a variety of jobs on the coast and elsewhere. Many continued to work at this kind of labor well after the Civil War. This 1939 photo shows cannery workers arriving at work on St. Helena Island. Library of Congress LC-USF33 30430Ml.

the wood hulls. Many even became sailors or boat pilots, who guided boats through narrow channels in bays and rivers.

In the cities the owners of skilled enslaved African-Americans sometimes allowed them to hire themselves out and keep a portion of their earnings. From the early 1700s on, some whites opposed this practice. The state legislature passed a law making hiring out illegal in 1845. Nevertheless, it continued because it benefited all the parties: the master, the enslaved African-American, and the person who hired the labor. Hiring out was most common in the high demand occupations, such as carpenters.

Some African-Americans worked in occupations which put them in competition with white workers. White workers felt that they were losing the chance to earn a living. Some masters had even bought shops for their enslaved African-American workers. Masters required workers to pay them only part of what they earned. In 1742, a group of white ship's carpenters asked the legislature to take some kind of action against their enslaved competitors. In 1756, the legislature passed a law that imposed a fine of five pounds a day on any enslaved African-American working by himself. The law did not work very well. Enslaved labor could still stay in business if the master hired one white for every two African-Americans he used.

In the early 1800s, some whites called for a tax on free black workers as well. The difficulties faced by white working people in getting good jobs led some well-known white Southerners to argue that enslavement should be abolished. They felt this would create more skilled jobs for whites. Some employers, such as William Gregg in Graniteville, opened factories which would employ only white workers. As more white immigrants came to America, free blacks faced even more difficulties. Some left the country altogether to go to Africa. White artisans even gave money to the colonization societies which helped African-Americans leave.

Records show that in the years before the Civil War, 1,000 different occupations employed African-American artisans and craftspersons. We have not mentioned other crafts, like wheelwrights, who made wheels for wagons and carriages, or coopers, who made the barrels in which nearly everything was shipped in those days. As you can see, the role of African-Americans in building South Carolina and the United States was enormous.

The Value of Enslaved Labor

Highly skilled enslaved African-Americans were worth a great deal of money. According to newspaper ads of the time, a skilled worker sold for twice as much as someone with no skills. Tragically, sales often separated these artisans from their families. Owners sometimes sold them because of debts, retirement, death, or a change in residence. If a large number of enslaved people were to be sold, generally a newspaper ad would simply state how many and what ages. The assumption was that they would be already trained. In time, the trade of enslaved people became a less respectable occupation. Traders began to call themselves commission agents, brokers, or auctioneers.

Estimating the prices for which these enslaved African-Americans were sold in today's dollars is difficult. We can see what some of the relative sale prices were for people with different skills. Some were sold privately, and some were sold at auctions. A Charleston shoemaker's value was listed at $350 in 1806. Sales prices in a Charleston newspaper in 1811 included the following: a cook for $420, a tailor for $350, a fisherman for $500, a young field hand for $450, and an elderly coachman for $250. Prices rose after the War of 1812, with skilled workers going for an average of $400 to $650. Artisans, such as carpenters, millers, and tailors, were sold for about $800 to $900. By the 1840s, skilled workers were selling for even more. The prices for carpenters were higher than most other occupations. Prices listed during this period range from about $700 to $1,000. A bricklayer sold for about $800.

There is a story of a blacksmith who was bought by friends to keep him from being sold away from his family. He worked off the cost of his freedom. The price he and his friends had to pay was high for that time. It came to $1,630. His friends must have loved him very much. He must have loved his family very much.

After 1850, with expansion into western lands, demand for enslaved Africans rose. Prices went up. One carpenter was sold for $1,750, a very high price. A newspaper ad in the 1850s offered a young woman who could cook, sew, wash, and iron, for $1,000. The price included her infant child. By 1860 prices climbed even higher. Few artisans could be bought for less than $1,200. Masters claimed a similar price as compensation for enslaved Africans who died or were injured serving in the Civil War or who escaped to the Union side. People who were healthy, had good morals, and were hard workers were highly valued.

Material and Cultural Heritage

Whether we think about the importance of work, the dollar value of work, the skills, or just the vast amount of labor needed, Africans were vital in the building of South Carolina. Not only did they bring skills and provide most of the labor, they brought with them a culture of work. That culture had a great impact on the culture of South Carolina and the culture of the nation. African styles of work influenced American styles of work. In later chapters we will look at other kinds of cultural contributions.